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## ABSTRACT

Noting that psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's pedagogical approach is predicated on the classroom discussion of mcral/dilemmas, this paper suggests that its affinity to the teaching of literature, communication, and composition is a natural one. The first part of the paper offers a detailed explication of Kohlberg's stages of scral development, while the second part provides suggestions for the application of Kohlberg's theory by English teachers. Specific suggestions offered include presenting moral dilemmas to the class to initiate discussion, writing assignments, oral reports, and analyses of literature; having students develop and present original dilemmas as the basis of class discussions and writing assignments; and directing students toward examples of moral dilemmas posed in literature selections in order to have them evaluate the charcters' responses to those dilemmas and discuss their cwn responses to them. (FI)

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# KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT:

A PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGM

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# KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT:

# A PEDAGÓGICAL PARADIGM<sup>1</sup>

As we venture into the 1980's, critics of American education have on one hand called for a return to the "basics" and on the other for rehewed attention to the teaching of values and "ethics" in classrooms.

James Mackey notes, "as the interest in values education accelerates, the concerned teacher's search for a workable value framework increases. One such framework has been evolved painstakingly by Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg and his associates in psychology and related disciplines. Kohlberg's work, a modern spin-off from that of John Dewey, provides a cognitive developmental paradigm that has promise for those interested in analysis of moral development in composition and communication.

Basic to Kohlberg's conceptualization is his now relatively well documented theory that all individuals pass through moral states or stages of thought. He argues that the most important of education's "hidden agendas" ought not to be such things as conformity or competition, but should be that of developing a higher sense of moral responsibility. One of education's highest functions is to serve as a stimulus and guide for such development. Ideally, the teacher functions as a facilitator who intervenes in classroom discussion opportunely by providing a higher frame of moral analysis than might otherwise emerge from classroom interaction on a given topic.

In order to accomplish such interaction, the teacher (1) must be able to determine the student's level of moral thought, and (2) must be able to articulate the subsequent stage at least one level higher in moral development should such level not normally develop from student interaction.

Since Kohlberg's pedagogical approach was predicated on the classroom discussion of moral dilemmas, we suggest that its affinity to
analysis of literature, communication, and composition is a most natural
one.

Our attention is centered in two ways. First we seek to colicate the rudiments of Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Second we will suggest a few applications for the teacher of literature.

Kohlberg's Stage Theory

Dr. Kohlberg explains that the theoretical basis of the stages of moral reasoning he proposes is found in the works of Kant, Dewey, and Piaget. The work of Piaget in the area of cognitive structuring of children's reasoning through the use of interviews and observation is most directly related to Kohlberg's work. Kohlberg says, "In 1955 I started to redefine and validate (through longitudinal and cross-cultural study) the Dewey-Piaget levels and stages." Kohlberg now claims to have validated the stages and indicates that the concept of stages implies three characteristics:

- 1. Stages are "structured wholes," or organized systems of thought. Individuals are consistent in level or moral judgment.
- 2. Stages form an invariant sequence. Under all conditions except extreme trauma, movement is always forward, never backward. Individuals never skip stages; movement is always to the next stage, up.
- 3. Stages are "hierarchial integrations." Thinking at a higher stage includes or comprehends within it lower-stage thinking. There is a tendency to function at or prefer the highest stage available.6

Kohlberg's stage theory itself is divided into three levels. Within each level there are two stages, which provides six stages in all. We will consider the definitions of the levels first, then turn to the six stages.

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Dr. Kohlberg has identified the three levels as preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. The person operating at the precionventional level responds to cultural labels of good and bad, and interprets these labels in terms of the physical consequences to oneself or in terms of the physical power of those who establish the rules and labels of good and bad. Thus, at this level the person reasons in terms of punishment, reward, or the exchange of favors.

The second level, conventional, can be thought of as a conformist level, but Kohlberg indicates that this is perhaps too smug a term.

The individual at this level is concerned with maintaining the expectations and rules of the family, group, or nation for its own sake. The concern is with both conforming to the social order and maintaining, supporting, and justifying this order.

In the postconventional level, the individual's moral reasoning is based upon autonomous principles which have validity and application apart from the individual's identification with those persons or groups. At this level the individual reasons according to internalized principles which have validity for all persons across all ages and time periods.

Additional clarification of the moral levels postulated by Kohlberg comes from a view of the levels in terms of the relationship between the self and society. Kohlberg explains:

One way of understanding the three levels is to think of them as three different types of relationships between the self and society's rules and expectations. From this point of view, a person at the preconventional level is one for whom rules and social expectations are something external to the self. A conventional person has achieved a socially normative appreciation of the rules and expectations of others, especially authorities, and identifies the self with the occupants of social or societal role relationships. The principled (or postconventional) person has differentiated self from normative roles and defining values in terms of self-constructed reflective principles.

As indicated earlier, within each of the three levels there are two stages. The first two stages occur at the preconventional level.

Kohlberg explains these stages as follows:

Stage 1: Orientation toward punishment and unquestioning deference to superior power. The physical consequences action regardless of their human meaning or value determine its goodness or badness.

Stage 2: Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the market-place. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity, and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

The third and fourth stages occur at the conventional level.

Again, Kohlberg explains:

Stage 3: Good-boy-good-girl orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or natural behavior. Behavior is often judged by intention—"he means well" becomes important for the first time, and is overused, as by Charlie Brown in <u>Peanuts</u>. One seeks approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: Orientation toward authority, fixed rules and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake. One earns respect by performing dutifully: 10

The final two stages are found in the postconventional level.

Kohlberg describes these stages as follows:

Stage 5: A social-contract orientation, generally with legalistic and utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be
defined in terms of general rights and in terms of standards
which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the
whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism
of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis
upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from
what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, right
or wrong is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The
result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with

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an emphasis upon the possibility of changing the law in terms of rational considerations of social utility, rather than freezing it in the terms of Stage 4 "law and order." Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract are the binding elements of obligation. This is the official morality of American government, and finds its

ground in the thought of the writers of the Constitution.

Stage 6: Orientation toward the decisions of conscience and toward self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Kole, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. Instead, they are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human, beings as individual persons.

Kohlberg's studies are based on a series of interviews with student and adult subjects regarding their responses to a series of moral dilemmas the researcher poses to them. An important feature of Kohlberg's work concerns the stress upon the moral reasoning employed by the subject. There are no necessarily right or wrong answers to the dilemmas; rather the researcher codes the statements of reasoning employed. The reader may be helped in understanding the stages by having an opportunity to see how subjects' responses are coded by Kohlberg.

The most frequently cited of Kohlberg's dilemmas is the case of Heinz. The story appears below:

In Europe, a woman was near death from cancer. One drug might save her, a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The druggist was charging \$2,000, ten times what the drug cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "no." The husband got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should the husband have done that? Why? 12

The answer to the question "should the husband have done that?" is not what is important to Kohlberg. Rather, the answers to "why" and to additional probing questions the researcher uses will determine at what

level of moral reasoning the subject is operating. Examples of pro and con responses at each stage will help to clarify this point.

"Stage 1: Punishment and obedience orientation.

Pro: It isn't really bad to take it—he did ask to pay for it first. He wouldn't do any other damage or take anything else and the drug he'd take is only worth \$200, he's not really taking a \$2,000 drug.

Con: Heinz doesn't have any permission to take the drug. He can't just go and break through a window or break the door down. He'd be a bad criminal doing all that damage. That drug is worth a lot of money and stealing anything so expensive would really be a hig crime. 13

Both of these examples are silent as to Heinz's intentions. Nor do they consider any obligation to his wife. The statements judge the crime in terms of the consequences of Heinz's action.

Stage 2: Instrumental relativist orientation.

Pro: Heinz isn't really doing any harm to the druggist, and he can always pay him back. If he doesn't want to lose his wife, he should take the drug because it's the only thing that will work.

Con: The druggist isn't wrong or bad, he just wants to make a profit like everyone else. That's what you're in business for, to make money. Business is business.14

At Stage 2 the intentions are very much in evidence. The pro statement mentions an intention to pay the druggist back, and the con statement shifts to the druggist's position indicating that the druggist is just like everyone else in wanting to make a profit. The hedonism contained in the pro statement is quite egoistic in suggesting that Heinz should commit the crime only "If he doesn't want to lose his wife." There is no concern shown for the wife. If Heinz does want to lose her, or if he doesn't care that much, it's a tough break for the wife.

Stage 3: Interpersonal concordance.

Pro: Stealing is bad but this is a bad situation. Heinz isn't doing wrong in trying to save his wife; he has no choice but to take the drug. He is only doing something.

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that is natural for a good husband to do. You can't blame him for doing something out of love for his wife. You'd blame him if he didn't love his wife enough to save her.

Con: If Heinz's wife dies he can't be blamed in these circumstances. You can't say he is a heartless husband just because he won't commit a crime. The druggist is the selfish and heartless one in this situation. Heinz tried to do everything he really could. 15

Now both answers are clearly fully involved in the parties' intentions.

The answers discuss who can be approved of and who cannot be approved of by measuring their intentions. Both answers find Heinz blameless, but the con statement in addition shifts the blame to the druggist.

Stage 4: Law and order orientation.

Pro: The druggist is leading a wrong kind of life if he just lets somebody die. You can't let somebody die like that, so it's Heinz's duty to save her. But Heinz can't just go around breaking laws and let it go at that—he must pay the druggist back and he must take his punishment for stealing.

Con: It's a natural thing for Heinz to want to save his wife, but it's still always wrong to steal. You have to follow the rules regardless of how you feel or regardless of the specific circumstances. 16

Here the statements consider intentions but add to that some perception of a natural law. Nonetheless, both the pro and the con statements eventually arrive at the conclusion that the obligation to obey the law overrides any "natural" inclinations Heinz may have.

Stage 5: Social contract orientation.

Pro: Before you say stealing is wrong you've got to really think about this whole situation. Of course the laws are quite clear about breaking into a store. And even worse, Heinz would know there were no legal grounds for his actions. Yet, I can see why it would be reasonable for anybody in this kind of situation to steal the drug.

Con: I can see the good that would come from illegally taking the drug, but the ends don't justify the means. You can often find a good action behind illegal action. You can't say Heinz would be completely wrong to steal the drug, but even these circumstances don't make it right. 17

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The Stage 5 statements demonstrate a more complex decision-making process. Here we find that for both sides neither good intentions alone nor the law alone is sufficient to guide action. There is a recognition that while the law cannot be ignored it is clearly unjust in this situation. The feeling seems to be that a better solution for these respondents would be to change the law, but since it has not been changed they find it difficult to either approve or disapprove of Heinz. Perhaps they would favor changing the law according to established procedures.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation.

Pro: Where the choice must be made between disobeying the law and saving a human life, the higher principle of preserving life makes it morally right—not just understandable—to steal the drug.

Con: There are so many cases of cancer today that with any new drug cure, I'd assume that the drug would be scarce and that there wouldn't be enough to go around to everybody. The right course of action can only be the one which is consistent to all people concerned. Heinz ought to act, not according to what is legal in this case, but according to what he conceives an ideally just person would do in this situation. 18

At the Stage 6 level of reasoning, both answers are quick to affirm the position that the law may be disobeyed if a higher principle is involved. The position taken is justified on the basis of a universal principle which everyone can live by no matter what role they will be called upon to play. Notice that the special relationship between husband and wife gives way at this stage to an even more important consideration of the supremacy of life over property.

With the foregoing discussion in mind, the reader is directed to

Table 1 which provides the definition of the moral stages within each level.

The Table provides an easy to use guide to Kohlberg's moral stages as a ready reference for the scholar/critic in an lying this theory to his rhetorical analyses.

### Table 1. Definition of Moral Stages

#### I. Preconventional level

At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and had, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of lavors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following two stages:

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness, regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter being Stage 4).

Stage 2: 'The instrumental relativist orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity, and of equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

#### II. Conventional level

At this level, maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude's not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it. At this level, there are the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "yood boy - nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is frequently judged by intention - "he means well" becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. There is orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

### III. Postconventional, autonomous, or principled level

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups. This level also has two stages:

Stage 5: The social-contract, legalistic orientation, generally with utilitarian overtones. Hight action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consenses. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, the right is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an emphasis upon, the possibility of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of Stage 4 "law and order"). Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract is the binding element of obligation. This is the "official" morality of the American government and constitution,

Stage 6: The universal ethical-principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons ("From Is to Ought," pp. 164, 165).

- Reprinted from The Journal of Philosophy, October 25, 1973

Kohlberg's research has led him to conclude that preconventional moral reasoning is the level of most children under the age of nine.

Some adolescents also reason at this level. Further, more recent studies have led him to blace many criminal offenders' reasoning, both adolescent and adult, at this level. Most adolescents and adults in our society and other cultures operate at the conventional level. The postconventional level is attained by only a minority of adults and is generally not reached until after age twenty. Whileers points out that "almost all individuals manifest more than 50 percent of responses at a single stage with the rest of the responses at adjacent stages."

out Kohlberg's belief "that the six stages are universal, hold true in all cultures, and that each stage represents a level of reasoning higher than the one immediately preceding it." Kohlberg states, "We claim. . . that each higher stage of reasoning is a more adequate way of resolving moral problems judged by moral-philosphic criteria." 22

# Application of the Stages

The application of Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory to the teaching of writing and literature necessitates some attention an underlying issue. Some people would argue that the schools have no business teaching morality or moral values. We can agree in part and disagree in part with this charge. The schools probably should not involve themselves directly in teaching specific moral values, and yet we all know that as teachers we cannot always clearly distinguish our own values from the subject matter. But more importantly, the business of education is to provide our students with the mental equipment they need to be able to cope with the challenges

of living in our society. The use of Kohlberg's Theory in the classroom is intended to provide the students with an understanding of the thought processes employed to justify certain decisions. As Kohlberg has stated:

"Whether we like it or not schooling is a moral enterprise. Values issues abound in the content and process of teaching."

Clearly, the schools are involved in teaching morality, and the use of Kohlberg's approach is designed to emphasize the understanding of the thought processes employed in making moral decisions. To the extent Kohlberg has validated the stepwise progression of individuals through the stages of moral development, this approach can serve to enhance the student's moral reasoning development.

Further justification for pursuing moral development comes from the increased concern for morality demonstrated by our society. Roger Brown and Richard J. Herrnstein, report:

In fact, since Kohlberg started his work, America has changed from a society in rather stable equilibrium to a society that is, as newspapers like to say, rent by conflict. The result is that thinking people have been driven beyond conformity to what exists, to try to find some widely acceptable ground on which established practices can be either defended or altered. In effect, we have moved into a great age of moral reasoning, as we did during the Civil War and the American Revolution, which were also times of massive conflict in the norms of the society as a whole. Today's newspapers, books, magazines, and television programs are all filled with moral arguments, not primarily about sex or swearing, but about other matters. And it is inevitable that the society will seek to understand what it can of this processes. . . 24

So we can see that society is showing increased interest in morality and educators and schools are intrinsically related to the process of understanding moral values. We believe that teachers of composition and communication are in a natural discipline for the application of Kohlberg's theory to the societal concern with morality.

Kohlberg's method involves the use of dilemmas to stimulate class discussion. We believe the use of dilemmas can aid class discussion, but

extend their application to written assignments, oral reports, speeches, and the analyses of literature. To initiate discussion, the instructor may pose a dilemma to the class for their responses. The teacher should be able to identify the stage of moral reasoning indicated by each response and help lead the discussion toward higher levels of reasoning through the use of probing questions. The written assignment following this discussion would ask the students to present their responses to the dilemma using what they believe to be the most valid reasoning. The assessment by the instructor of the assignments would be based primarily on the lucid expression of the reasoning, but could also consider the stage of reasoning employed and pose some questions designed to encourage the student to consider the next higher stage of reasoning. But the grade should not be equated to the stage of reasoning employed, rather it should be based on the quality of the communication regardless of the stage or moral reasoning demonstrated.

Later class assignments could encourage the student to develop and present original dilemmas. The students' dilemmas could then be the basis for class discussion and further writing assignments. The attention of the class could then be directed toward examples of literature in which the students are asked to identify the moral dilemma or dilemmas posed by the literature, to evaluate the characters' responses to those dilemmas, and to discuss the student's response to the dilemma.

The approach we recommend is not currently being employed to the extent we recommend by any department or institution of which we have knowledge. There have been isolated experiments with various aspects of this system around the United Stages; but no concerted or concentrated effort has yet appeared. Some English teachers have tried using some dilemmas in class with a certain degree of success. There have been a

few examples of social studies teachers using the dilemmas for class discussion, and we know of one case of an effort to evaluate literature using this method. But we recommend not a piecemeal approach, rather a multipronged use of dilemmas and literature evaluation to encourage our students to understand and progress in their moral reasoning.

We can offer a sample dilemma for use in pursuing our recommendation:

The Case of Sharon.

Skaron and her best friend Jill are shopping when Jill wants to try on a blouse. Emerging from a dressing room, Jill catches Sharon's eye, indicates she is wearing the blouse, then leaves the store without a word. A few minutes later, store personnel and a security officer approach Sharon. A clerk says either Sharon or her friend has taken the blouse; the manager wants to prosecute. "What's the name of the girl you were with?" the security officer asks. "If you don't tell us, you can be charged with the crime or with aiding the person who committed the crime." Should Sharon give Jill's name to the officer? 26

# Conclusion

We hope that this discussion of Kohlberg's Theory and its application to the classroom will stimulate further investigation into moral reasoning and the use of moral dilemmas for written and oral assignments. Certainly, we encourage everyone who considers adopting this approach to delve more deeply into the research reports of Kohlberg's work that are available.

We turn to Lawrence Kohlberg for our final word of advice:

Knowing that someone's thinking is moral stage 2 is not to say that that person does not think or act morally; it is to recognize his sense of right and fairness as stage 2. To understand a person's stage 2 reasoning helps us to understand his point of view, to put ourselves in that person's place and see the world through his eyes. We sometimes label the stage 2 way of thinking "instrumental egoism," but this does not mean that stage 2 individuals care nothing for other people or have no sense of fairness. It means, rather, that their concern for others is limited by the notion that people basically have to look out for themselves in this world, so that good relations are based on trade-offs.27

So while we recognize higher levels of reasoning, we need to be careful that we do not evaluate the individual unfairly because his level of reasoning has not yet developed to a stage we approve.

- Dr. Kohlberg is currently the Director of Harvard's Center for Moral Education. He has been involved in intensive research into moral development for more than twenty years:
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- Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Development," <u>Journal of Philosophy</u>, 70 (October 1973) p. 633. See also, Kohlberg, "The Concepts of Developmental Psychology as the Central Guide to Education: Examples from Cognitive, Moral, and Psychological Education," in Peter Scharf (ed.) <u>Moral and Psychological Education</u>: Theory and Research (R F Publishing, Inc., 1976) p. 6
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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid
- 11<sub>Ibid</sub>
- 12 Fraenkel, p. 57
- Roger Brown and Richard J. Herrnstein, <u>Psychology</u> (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975) p. 313.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.

- 17<sub>161</sub> pp. 313-314.
- 18<sub>1bld</sub>. p. 314.
- Developmental Approach," in T. Lickona (ed.) Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research and Social Issues (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1976) p. 33
- 20<u>1bid</u>. p. 47
- <sup>21</sup>Fraenkel, p. 59
- Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization," p. 46.
- Lawrence Kohlberg and Richard H. Hersh, "Moral Development: A Review of the Theory," Theory into Practice, XVI (April, 1977), 53.
- 24 Brown and Herrnstein, p. 309.
- Richard Beach, "On Literature and Values," Unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (65th, San Diego, November 27-29, 1975).
- Mary Lou Nolan, "Schools Develop Methods of Teaching Morals," Kansas
  City Star (Feb. 26, 1980), 1.
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